

MARCH 27, 1980

Outside the small room that serves as my temporary office, a big sheep auction is going full blast. I had no intention of coming to the sale. It's a spring event sponsored by the Sonora Experiment Station. My neighbor Goat Whiskers The Younger is responsible for the trip. Whiskers lathers into high emotion at the chance of hearing an auctioneer's chant. With the whole Shortgrass Country as dry as the ancient tombs of Egypt, I'd prefer being at a garden party, or maybe covering a style show.

The first ram brought \$3850. These sheep are all performance tested and indexed by the station's specialists. Last spring the top ram brought \$5500. So you see that Whiskers isn't the only one that gets excited over the deal.

There's a big change in the audience over other years. Everybody looks so much older. I watched one of my contemporaries climb over a sheep panel this morning. He threw his hind leg over the top bar like he was demonstrating a ball and joint ailment for a chiropractors' seminar.

It was flat dangerous in the working alleys. The visiting hombres seemed to be unaware that the handlers were shifting the different consignments from pen to pen. Two hundred and fifty pounds of performance fattened buck armed by two big curly horns is a brutal force for the human body to take up above the hock line, yet the old boys seemed to be oblivious to their surroundings.

By accident, I discovered one source of the distractions. I picked up a discarded program out at the pens. The whole back page was scratched up into conversions of dollars to tons of feed. Whoever was doing that fancy but familiar mathematics wasn't thinking about buying a registered ram; he was worrying about feeding his unpapered stuff at the ranch.

I'm unsure but I think I spotted the guy later on down at a supply shed by himself. A great big tall fellow was turning over a sack of portland cement trying to find the tag. I saw people break down like that during the big drouth of the '50s. We had one case at Mertzon that sent off the stuffing in his kid's teddy bear for protein analysis. High winds and bare ground make a lot of people act strange.

At a sheep or a cow sale, an auctioneer has to be mighty gifted to overcome an audience of drouth stricken ranchers. The colonels and the starters have to be extra talented spellbinders to wipe away the reality of dry weather.

Bull merchants and buck peddlers alike have a dreary time when the weather fails. The very son of Prince Stovepipe and Lady Chill-budget is apt to go at near lunchmeat prices. I think the reason registered dealers keep such large trophy rooms is to carry them emotionally through the drouths.

Whiskers and I split company after I bought his lunch. Last I saw of him he was carrying on in a big way in the buyer's stand. It'd be just like him to run that \$3 lunch tab into a \$1500 sheep buy. What I hope is that the gasoline tanks are full. I've gone home broke before.